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The People of God's Imagination

Hebrews 12:1-2

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Some two years before Queen Victoria died, she was at her Scottish home. Though she had many homes, her favorite was Balmoral Castle in the northeast of Scotland. While there the Queen received word that a woman who lived nearby had reached the age of 104, so the Queen decided to visit her and sent word that she would be coming on a particular afternoon. The old woman was, of course, thrilled and deeply touched that the Queen of Great Britain and the Empress of India would come to her modest cottage. It's recorded that they had a lovely visit. They talked of things that any two long-lived people would discuss, though it was the royal protocol that the Queen not be asked any personal questions. When Victoria rose to leave, she took the woman's hand and squeezed it affectionately. It was then that the elderly woman presumed on the royal etiquette and, in a hesitant voice, and still holding the Queen's hand, said, "Your Majesty, may I ask you a question?"

The Queen replied: "You may ask anything you wish."

Almost trembling, the ancient woman said: "Will you and I meet again in the home above?"

Whereupon Victoria took both hands of the woman and, bending low to her subject, said: "By the grace of God and the blood of Christ, we will meet again in Heaven, for the Lord Jesus is my Saviour, too."

And there, in one simple sentence, the Queen summed up the whole of salvation. But she did something else as well. The writer to the Hebrews believed that he and the whole church of his day, were 'surrounded by such a cloud of witnesses' that there was great encouragement from above, to 'throw off everything that hinders' and to 'throw off the sin that so easily entangles.' By affirming her faith in Jesus Christ as Savior, Queen Victoria joined with the 104 year old woman and with those who have gone before to Heaven, and brought to little the differences between us that come from birth or success.

My family in Christ, it is through God's providence that we are also surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. That is a humbling truth for us to remember because not one of us chose to come into this life. We did not choose our race, our nationality, nor our parents. Just the reverse is true. We were chosen. Our life began in God's imagination, and by His grace and power we were knitted in our mother's womb, and by God's providence, a purpose for living has been given to each of us. That sacred reality was confessed by the Hebrews of ancient Israel, and it was reaffirmed by Jesus Christ. This sacred reality was taught by the first century church, and was confessed by Augustine, and by the Reformers Martin Luther, John Calvin and John Knox. The sacred truth that we are chosen by God and that God would partner with us to do His ministry here on our earth, is the foundation for the living of every day as God gives us.

The life we live also has colossal freedom. It is freedom to rejoice in God's grace, freedom to follow His commandments, freedom to embrace Christ and to serve in His name. Yet, that same freedom means we have the freedom to cling to pride, vanity, greed, self-righteousness, and every form of idolatry. Freedom is awesome and sometimes terrible, but without it, we would not bear the image of God. And I believe that God knew from the beginning the implications of His gift of freedom, and that is one of the reasons He surrounded us with such a 'great cloud of witnesses.'

Every person needs a champion, and every person needs a family. By God's grace, we are given our natural families, and also by God's grace, we are given the extended family which is our church. In both of these families, it is God's desire that we give and receive encouragement and unconditional love.

In Scotland of old, families would occasionally gather for a form of the kirkin' of the tartans as a way of asking for God's blessings upon the extended family, for the tartan they would wear or carry never represented only their own nuclear family, but all the families within their clan, and all those clansmen and clanswomen who had passed before. After the Battle of Culloden in 1746, King George prohibited the wearing of any tartan, yet many families would conceal a piece of tartan and take it into the church, where the pastor might ask God's blessings.

As you may know, this ceremony was revived not in Scotland but in America by the late Scottish-American pastor, Peter Marshall. We think Marshall lit upon this ceremony in large part because of the way it reinforces the notion that, though sometimes dysfunctional, we in the church are a family who needs God's blessings, as well as the encouragement of the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before.

So, whether you grew up Methodist or Baptist or Roman Catholic or Lutheran or Episcopalian, if you are now a Presbyterian, you are a recipient of the theology, polity, and tradition of the Church of Scotland, founded by John Knox. If you have not a drop of Scottish blood, but you are a Presbyterian, then you are an heir to a great legacy, and part of that legacy is your experience of the church as an extended family. The church of Jesus Christ was never meant to be a place simply to visit on Sunday - it was and is the place where those who have *encountered* Jesus of Nazareth come to worship Him and find support and encouragement to continue the path of *following* Him. So the church is far more than a building - it the place where we are grafted to Christ, and by grace, surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. These witnesses are all around you in this sanctuary, right now. They are family by blood, some of them, but most are family by Christ, by *His* blood shed on a cross. This extended family is the one that has brought you good cheer and has boosted you when you needed to be lifted up. This family of ours is the one that has embraced you in times of sadness and despair, and they have laughed with you in happy times. And they have prayed for you when you didn't know it.

And also with those present today, there is also that other group, the cloud of witnesses who are watching from their heavenly seats, and in some way we can't understand, present with us also this morning. These saints in Heaven have not forgotten you. They are your loved ones who will always be your champion and who are praying for you. They know the joy of Heaven, and they are praying that you and I will lay aside every weight and sin that we may have a foretaste now of Heaven's joy. They understand perfectly the difficulties of our life and how certain sins have a tendency to cling, but they know as well the power given to us to renounce evil and to choose holiness. They know the immensity and grace of such power because they are face-to-face with the Source of all power and love. And so they cheer us on.

So, with the church throughout the world today, and with the church throughout the ages, we declare in praise and thanksgiving that from Him we have received grace upon grace, and that we are among the chosen, and that we will in gratitude dedicate our lives to Him and to His way, the way of a cross, and accept His help in carrying this yoke we have freely taken to be ours as well.

Today, you are all Presbyterians, and by my proclamation, all Scots as well. Be at peace with one another, and remember the great cloud of witnesses who stand with us to cheer us on.

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